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ABSTRACT

This digest identifies current programmatic efforts to inform and support parents and briefly reviews research on the effectiveness of parent education and support programs. The discussion of approaches to parent support focuses on parent education programs, the Education of the Handicapped Act Amendments (Public Law 99-457), Head Start, state early childhood programs that center on families, and local, grassroots parent-oriented programs, such as Chicago's Family Resource Coalition. Evaluations of intensive parent- or family-oriented early childhood programs serving low-income populations have found positive short-term effects on child competence and maternal behaviors, and long-term effects on such family characteristics as level of education, family size, and financial self-support. Dimensions of a high quality parent program are discussed. (RH)

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Parent Education and Support Programs

Douglas R. Powell

Today there are numerous signs that the task of rearing competent children is becoming increasingly difficult. Dramatic changes in the structure and lifestyles of families and growing societal pressure for children to possess specific knowledge and skills at an early age are just two of the new and challenging conditions of parenthood. Conflicting research information sometimes results in conflicting advice for parents. Parents have always routinely sought the advice and help of relatives, friends and professionals. However, traditional sources of help—especially the extended family and neighborhood—are less available today than they were in the past.

Teachers and other human service professionals have long recognized the need to provide parents with child-rearing information and support. The formation of partnerships between parents and teachers that will foster children's development has been a persistent goal of most early childhood programs and elementary schools. In recent years, this goal has taken on increased importance as diverse segments of American society have recognized the need to help parents deal with the multiple pressures of rearing children in today's complex world. This digest describes current programmatic efforts to inform and support parents, and briefly reviews the research evidence on the effectiveness of parent education and support programs.

Approaches to Supporting Parents

The term *parent education* typically evokes the image of an expert lecturing a group of mothers about the ages and stages of child development. Yet a view of parent education and support as a staff-directed, didactic activity is neither a complete nor accurate portrayal of many programs of parent education and support. The concept of the parent education field has broadened considerably in the past two decades. At federal, state, and local levels, there are now a variety of ambitious and diverse initiatives aimed at supporting families with young children.

An important federal effort is the recent Education of the Handicapped Act Amendments (Public Law 99-457), which assist states in offering early intervention services for infants and toddlers and their families. The amendments call for a multidisciplinary team, which includes the parent or guardian, to develop an individualized family service plan that includes a statement of the family's strengths and needs in regards to enhancing the child's development. Services are to be aimed at the family system, not the child alone. This law strengthens the commitment to parent involvement set forth in Public Law 94-142, the Education of All Handicapped Children Act of 1975.

Another federal effort, Head Start, has been this country's most extensive investment in the education of young children. Head Start has experimented with innovative strategies for involving families in program activities since its beginnings in 1965 (Zigler and Freedman, 1987).

State governments have been active in developing early childhood programs focused on families. One of the oldest state efforts is Minnesota's Early Childhood and Family Education Program. Founded in 1975, the program operates through local school districts to provide parent discussion groups, home visits, child development classes, and other approaches to enhancing and supporting parental competence. State-level initiatives designed to support families with young children have been established in a number of other states.

Local communities throughout the country have fostered the creation of a rapidly growing number of parent-oriented programs. These efforts, many of which have grassroots origins, range from drop-in center formats to peer self-help group methods. The Family Resource Coalition, based in Chicago, was founded in 1981 by many diverse community-based programs as a national organization for promoting the development of family resource programs.

The Effects of Parent Education and Support

Research on the effects of programs aimed at enhancing parents' child-rearing competence points to some promising patterns. Evaluations of intensive parent- or family-oriented early childhood programs serving low-income populations have found positive short-term effects on child competence and maternal behaviors, and long-term effects on such family characteristics as level of education, family size, and financial self-support (Powell, 1989). Other data suggest that the magnitude of program effects is associated with the number of program contacts with a

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family (Heinicke, Beckwith and Thompson, 1988) and the range of services offered to the family.

Little is known about effects of programs employing modest approaches to parent education and support, such as periodic lectures. Research on working- and middle-class populations is especially sparse.

Dimensions of a High-Quality Parent Program

The rapid growth of parent education and support programs leads to questions about what constitutes a high-quality program. Four program dimensions are proposed below on the basis of existing research and theory (see Powell, 1989).

1. It can be argued that high-quality programs are characterized by collaborative, equal relations between parents and program staff in which the intent is to empower parents in their child-rearing roles (Powell, 1988). It is increasingly suggested that program staff serve as facilitators of goals and activities jointly determined by parents and program staff, and not as experts who assume they know what is best for parents (Cochran, 1988). Illustrative of this approach is open-ended discussion of parent-initiated topics as opposed to a largely one-way flow of information from staff to parent. Collaborative parent-staff ties provide a means for ensuring that program methods and content are responsive to parents' needs.

2. Research data suggest that parent programs need to maintain a balanced focus on the needs of both parent and child. The content of parent programs has broadened in recent years to include significant attention to the social context of parenthood. This substantive shift reflects an interest in the interconnectedness of child, family, and community, and assumes that providing parents with social support in the form of helpful interpersonal relationships and material assistance (if needed) will enhance parent functioning and, ultimately, child development. Program efforts toward this end include the strengthening of parents' social networks, social support, and community ties as a buffer against stressful life circumstances and transitions. The term *parent support* is a reflection of the shift. While there are strong justifications for the shift, there is the potential problem that parents' needs and interests may overshadow program attention to the child. The literature on programs serving high-risk populations, for instance, points to the tendency for program workers to become heavily involved in crisis intervention regarding family matters (Halpern and Larner, 1988).

3. A recent development in parent education and support has resulted in programs being tailored to be responsive to the needs and characteristics of the population being served. The idea that a particular program model can work with almost any parent has given way to an interest in matching parents to different types of programs. This interest is especially evident in efforts to design programs that are responsive to cultural characteristics and values of ethnic populations, and in programs serving parents living in low-income and high-risk circumstances.

4. In high quality initiatives, a significant amount of program time is devoted to open-ended parent-dominated discussion. Principles of adult education recommend that programs include a strong experiential component. This is critical, because parents are likely to process new information according to existing beliefs about their child and child development. Discussion provides an opportunity for parents to digest new insights in relation to existing ideas.

Conclusion

Programs of parent education and support offer promising strategies for facilitating the education and development of young children. It is crucial for educators and policymakers to find ways to alter classroom practices, early childhood programs, and schools to promote the family's contributions to early education and development.

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